Lomonosov Moscow State University

Department of Linguistics and IT

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**Distance course « The World of Britain»**

**FINAL PROJECT**

# British humour vs. Russian Humour.

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# Introduction.

# What's Humour?

According to the scientific definition, humour is the tendency of particular cognitive experiences to provoke laughter and provide amusement. The term derives from the humoral medicine of the ancient Greek, which taught that the balance of fluids in the human body, known as humours (Latin "body fluids"), controlled human health and emotion. In other words, when people have a good laugh it makes our body fluids flow faster which in its turn makes us healthier. So the well- known saying 'Laughter makes us live longer' has some *scientific grounds*. *It is generally* known that humour contributes to both physical and psychological well-being. That is positive humour leads to positive health.

Let us have a look at differert types of humour.

Positive humour.

1. Affiliative style humour. Individuals with this dimension of humour tend to use jokes as a mean of affiliating relationships, amuse others, and reduce tensions.
2. Self-enhancing style humour. People that fall under this dimension of humour tend to take a humorous perspective of life. Individuals with self-enhancing humour tend to use it as a mechanism to cope with stress.

Negative humour.

1. Aggressive humour. Racist jokes, sarcasm and disparagement of individuals for the purpose of amusement. This type of humour is used by people who do not consider the consequences of their jokes, and mainly focus on the entertainment of the listeners.
2. Self-defeating humour. People with this style of humour tend to amuse others by using self-disparaging jokes, and also tend to laugh along with others when being taunted. It is hypothesised that people use this style of humour as a mean of social acceptance.

In my view, British humour may be described as generally negative, while Russian humour is mostly positive. I hope, you will agree with me after reading this essay.

People of all ages and cultures respond to humour. Most people are able to experience humour and are considered to have a sense of humour. However, the extent to which a person finds something humorous depends on a range of variables, such as geographical location, culture, maturity, and level of education.

# Humour in Britain.

## Stereotypes.

Many English people seem to believe that they have some sort of global monopoly, if not on humour itself, then at least on certain ‘brands’ of humour – the high-class ones such as wit and especially irony.

That is why, irony and heavy sarcasm are considered the bedrock of British humour. If it were pouring outside, the joke would be to comment on the lovely weather. It is as if it is ‘Opposite Day’ every day in Britain.



To make matters even more confusing, the delivery of British humour is almost always deadpan which means that there will be no sign in red neon lights telling you ‘This Is The Joke’. There is a lot of reading between the lines to be done and so as result of this, you might find yourself in situations where you just cannot tell if it was harmless banter or a serious conversation that you were having with a British friend.

Finally, subjects of humour typically involve mockery of failure, both yours and theirs but mostly yours.

It might seem insensitive and if you were anywhere outside Britain, you would probably be right. But joking about your dead grandfather or your cousin’s dyslexia is completely acceptable in the country of tea.

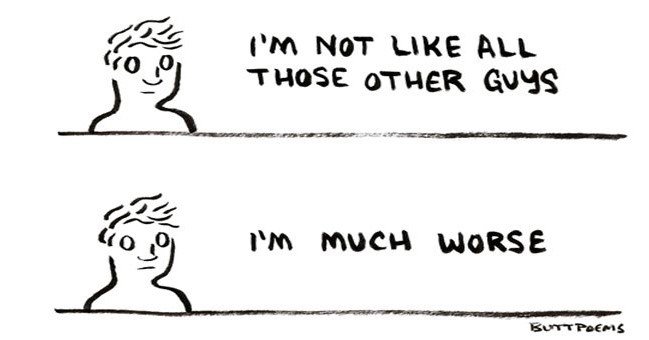
Here is another opinion on British humour. Antropologist Kate Fox in her book "Watching the English" says:" My findings indicate that while there may indeed be something distinctive about English humour, the real ‘defining characteristic’ is the *value* we put on humour, the central importance of humour in English culture and social interactions.(...) Humour is our **‘**default mode’, if you like: we do not have to switch it on deliberately, and we cannot switch it off. For the English, the rules of humour are the cultural equivalent of natural laws – we obey them automatically, rather in the way that we obey the law of gravity."

### Basic characteristics of British Humour.

In English conversation, there is always an undercurrent of humour. English can barely manage to say ‘hello’ or comment on the weather without somehow contriving to make a bit of a joke out of it, and most English conversations will involve at least some degree of banter, teasing, irony, understatement, humorous self-deprecation, mockery or just silliness.

**Self – deprecation**saying that you are worse than you actually are, putting yourself down.

*Examples*.

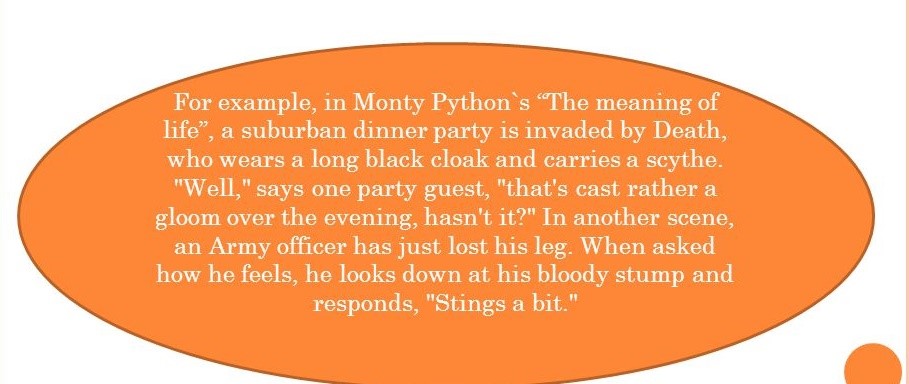


* I’m on that new “seafood” diet. If I see food, I eat it.
* “I am so clever that sometimes I don't understand a single word of what I am saying.”   
  ― [**Oscar Wilde**](https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/3565.Oscar_Wilde), [**The Happy Prince and Other Stories**](https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/23684401)
* “Don't be afraid! We won't make an author of you, while there's an honest trade to be learnt, or brick-making to turn to.”   
  ― [**Charles Dickens**](https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/239579.Charles_Dickens), [**Oliver Twist**](https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/3057979)

**Understatement**– a form of speech which contains an expression of less strength than what would be expected. The reasons for our prolific understating are not hard to discover: our strict prohibitions on earnestness, gushing, emoting and boasting require almost constant use of understatement. Rather than risk exhibiting any hint of forbidden solemnity, unseemly emotion or excessive zeal, we go to the opposite extreme and feign dry, deadpan indifference.

*Examples.*

* The understatement rule means that a ainful chronic illness must be described as ‘a bit of a nuisance’; a truly horrific experience is ‘well, not exactly what I would have chosen’; a sight of breathtaking beauty is ‘quite pretty’; an outstanding performance or achievement is ‘not bad’; an act of abominable cruelty is ‘not very friendly’, and an unforgivably stupid misjudgement is ‘not very clever’;



* [Aunt Sally] “Good gracious, anybody hurt?”   
  [Huck] “No’m. Killed a nigger. In Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Fin*,

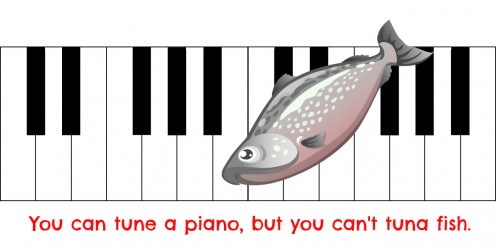
**Irony** – saying something that is in contradiction with reality.

*Examples*.



* A man looked out of the window to see the storm intensify. He turned to his friend and said “wonderful weather we’re having!”
* Simple phrases, usually in the form of similes, with obvious incongruities ie: clear as mud, smooth as sandpaper, friendly as a coiled rattlesnake

**Word Play** - a form of wit in which the word a that are used become the subject of the work primarily for the purpose of the intended effect or amusement.



* It wasn’t much fun having a broken neck, but now I can look back and laugh.
* A tourist on the London Underground asked “Could you tell me how to get to the airport via Barking?” So I pointed at a map and woofed. *Darren Walsh, British comedian.*

## Themes and Genres.

Some themes (with examples) that underpinned late 20th century British humour were

**Innuendo.**

In British humour it is evident in the literature as far back as Beowulf and Chaucer and it is a prevalent theme in many British folk songs. Innuendo is when you say something which is polite and innocent on the surface, but indirectly hints at an insult or rude comment, a dirty joke, or even social or political criticism. Innuendos are commonly used in everyday conversation as a socially acceptable way to be critical, mean, sexual, humorous, or even flirtatious. The word innuendo comes from the Latin phrase *innuere* meaning to “make a sign to” or “nod to.” *Example.*

Imagine a friend is preparing to cheat on a test with a stolen answer key. He says:

*I’ve found a way to get some “extra help” on the test.*

The use of quotation marks to emphasize the phrase “extra help” is a common way to use innuendo. This implies that the phrase is being used in a special way

**Satire.**

Disrespect to members of the establishment and authority, typified by:

* *Discworld*, comic fantasy book series written by Terry Pratchett; heavy with irony criticising various aspects of society (1983-2015)
* *The Last Leg, Channel 4* (2012-) is summed up by main presenter Adam Hills as: "Three guys with four legs talking about the week." This is based upon the fact that Hills was born without a right foot and Brooker had his right leg amputated when he was a baby.The original series, broadcast during the 2012 Paralympics, was a look back at each day's events during the competition, as well as a look at the news that week. Following on from the Paralympics, the series became weekly and thus looks at the events in the news that week, as well as covering Paralympic matters

**Absurd**.

The absurd and the surreal, typified by:

* *Monty Python*, comedy troupe, originally noted for performing sketches without conclusions (1969–1983)

**Macabre.**

Black humour in which topics and events that are usually treated seriously are treated in a humorous or satirical manner, typified by

*Four Lions* , a 2010 film satirising Jihadi terrorosts within British society.

**British class system**

The British class system, especially class tensions between characters; and pompous or dim-witted members of the upper/middle classes or embarrassingly blatant social climbers, typified by:

* Jeeves and Wooster books by W. G. Wodehouse (later played by Fry and Laurie)

**Lovable rogue:** often from the impoverished working class, trying to 'beat the system' and better himself, typified by:

* The *Andy Capp*, cartoon strip created by Reginald Smythe
* *The Likely Lads*, TV series

**Embarrassment of social ineptitude,** typified by:

* *Mr. Bean*, comedy TV series starring Rowan Atkinson
* The Inbetweeners, Channel 4 comedy series detailing the last years of sixth form for a group of average teenage boys

**Race and regional stereotypes.**

Although racism was a part of British humour, it is now frowned upon. Most racist themes in popular comedy since the 1970s are targeted against racism rather than in sympathy.

* *Love Thy Neighbour* and T*ill Death Us Do Part* were both series that dealt with these issues when the United Kingdom was coming to terms with an influx of immigrants.

**Pranks and practical jokes.**

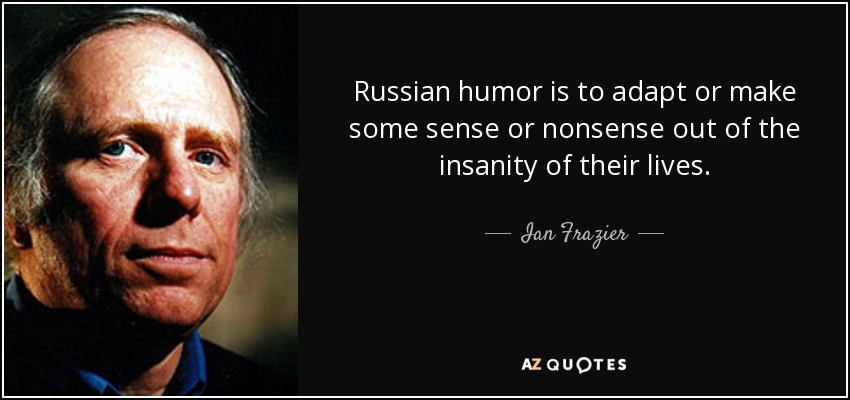
Usually, for television, the performance of a practical joke on an unsuspecting person whilst being covertly filmed.

* Game for a Laugh
* Tiger Happy TV

# Humour in Russia.

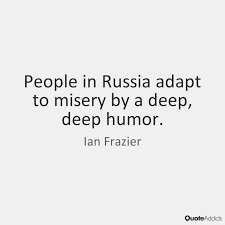
## Stereotypes.

**Ian Frazier** is an American writer and humorist. He wrote the 1989 non-fiction history *Great Plains*, 2010's non-fiction travelogue *Travels in Siberia*, and worked as a writer and humorist for New York Times. Here is what he thinks about Russian sense of humour.



Given the disaster Russian history has been more or less continuously for the last five centuries, its humour is of the darkest, most extreme kind. Russian humour is to ordinary humour what backwoods fundamentalist poisonous snake handling is to a petting zoo

“Russia is like slapstick (*a type of comedy relating exaggerated physical violence and activities which go beyond the boundaries of ordinary sense*), except you actually die,” Frazier said. “Extreme humour. Russia has both intentional humour and unintentional humour. It’s produced some of the funniest writing ever—intentionally funny—and then you see Putin on TV with his shirt off reenacting a Russian fairy tale, and I don’t know if he knows it’s funny.”



Humour in Russian is a year-round conception and virtually round-the-clock. Disposition to humour now and then can seem kind of paradoxical. Why are we laughing on where we should cry? I would say it helps to survive. In a joke one can find a grain of vitally important persistence.

To sum up, humour is being used as an "antidepressant" by Russian people since far from now. The whole dramatic history of Russia can be described if based on its humour

## Genres in Russian Humour.

We will refer to wikipedia to one more time to find out which genres can be distinguished in Russian humour:

**Jokes.** The most popular form of Russian humour consists of jokes (anekdoty), which are short stories with a punch line. Typical of Russian joke culture is a series of categories with fixed and highly familiar settings and characters. Surprising effects are achieved by an endless variety of plots and plays on words.

**Toasts.** Drinking toasts can take the form of anecdotes or not-so-short stories, concluded with "So here's to..." with a witty punch line referring to the initial story.

**Chastushka**. A specific form of humour is chastushkas, songs composed of four-line rhymes, usually of lewd, humoristic, or satiric content.

**Black humour**. Apart from jokes, Russian humour is expressed in word play and short poems including nonsense and black humour verses, similar to some of the macabre "nursery rhymes" of Edward Lear. Often they have recurring characters such as "little boy", "Vova", "a girl", "Masha". Most rhymes involve death or a painful experience either for the protagonists or other people. This type of joke is especially popular with children.

# Similarities and Differences. Conclusion.

In conclusion, I would like to say that these two nations, Britons and Russians, have a lot in[[1]](#endnote-1) common in terms of humour, on the one hand, and there are certain differences, on the other hand.

Let us consider similarities in Russian and British humour. Both cultures seem to share universal and very typical genres: these are word plays (or puns), satire (against the absurdity of life), parodies (imitating celebrities to undermine some illusions about them) and black humour.

Typical themes also reveal lots of coincidences: national stereotypes (especially language and speech), politics, self-deprecation or self-irony and obscenity. No doubt, ethnic compositions and political systems in Great Britain and Russia differ a lot, but, as we may see, these themes are made fun of in both countries.

As to differences in Russian and British humour, the British generally make fun of themselves in an ironic way emphasizing their weak points, while the Russian, even when talking about national weaknesses (such as laziness or stinginess), try to emphasize positive national features (such as physical robust or mother wit) to compensate negative traits.

What is more, the Russian have a great variety of archetypes in humour, whereas the British are famous for their intellectual and cruel jokes. Such differences may provoke difficulties and misunderstanding in a cross-national exchange of jokes if participants are not familiar with their interlocutors' culture.

What I really like about Russian humor is that Russians are more open while expressing themselves. Russian humor may not be as "sophisticated" as English humor, but it really is quite good, open and intelligent and most importantly, Russians are ready to laugh at themselves. Russians will happily laugh at their own social problems and other uncomfortable things - the government, poor culture and uneducated people (dummies).

And there are actually many things that I really admire British humour for. For one, it teaches you not to take yourself too seriously through its strong theme of self-deprecation which I feel is very important in this day and age. It also makes light of tough situations, which is a good thing because when things look grim, it definitely helps to laugh. But most of all, I like that the very nature of British humour does not encourage over-sensitivity or self-entitlement, two things our generation, Generation Y could learn to live without .

# Sources

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1. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)